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ABSTRACT

These six briefs summarize what researchers and practitioners have learned on several education-related subjects. They can be used by educators and community organizations in newsletters, handbooks, and school calendars. In "Foreign Languages in America? Gimme a Break!" a case is made for the importance of foreign language instruction for students to be successful in the world. Suggestions for working parents whose children must engage in some "self-care" are given in "Are the Children Home Alone? (Don't Worry, Be Savvy!)." "Learning to Read Well: Some Simple Facts" provides statistics about learning to read and suggests experiences that encourage reading. Advising divorced parents, the brief called "Helping Your Children Put Divorce Behind Them" points out that most children of divorced parents can adjust well after a time with adults' help. In "The World According to Science: Think About It" it is explained that science is more than a class in school--it is a special set of beliefs, tools, and habits of mind for considering the real world. The final brief, "I Don't Have Time to Read--Honest!", stresses the importance of encouraging teenagers to continue to read, and to do so with a purpose in mind. All briefs provide information on contacting the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools for more resources. (KS)

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Briefs for Parents in Ready-to-Copy Form (English Versions)

In plain language these six briefs state what researchers and practitioners have learned. Originally prepared as articles for rural newsweeklies as "filler," the six briefs have been given high marks by both editors and readers.

You'll probably come up with a variety of uses for these briefs, once you review them. Other educators and community organizations, however, have used the briefs...

- *in class, school, or district newsletters;*
- *in report cards;*
- *for handouts at PTA or PTO meetings;*
- *for parent conferences;*
- *for distribution in public waiting rooms (for example, doctors' offices, post offices, health departments);*
- *as readings in parent information or training courses;*
- *in school handbooks or in orientation materials for parents of incoming students;*
- *in teacher inservice packets; or*
- *in school calendars.*

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Foreign Languages in America? Gimme a Break!

LITTLE ELSE is more foreign to Americans than being able to use a foreign language. There are exceptions, of course.

The most notable exception is the Hispanic-American population. According to a recent report by Calvin Veltman, nearly 80 percent of this population of 13.5 million is bilingual. Why? It's a matter of prosperity. To do well in America, it's important to speak English.

A lot of the rest of us are lucky enough to be born speaking English, right? So what's the problem?

The problem is that, for Americans, knowing other languages, too, is a matter of prosperity. To do well in the *world*, Americans need to speak other languages.

America is no longer the isolated nation it was 100 years ago: No nation is. We know today what happens today in China, in France, and in Mexico. To do well in this shrinking world, Americans need to understand cultures, values, and languages that are very different from their own.

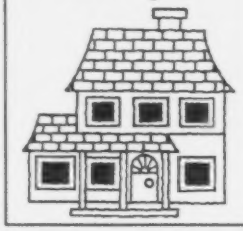
General Motors, for example, had a tough time selling its popular Chevrolet Nova in Latin America. That was because "No va!" in Spanish means "It doesn't go!" And Spanish is the second language most commonly taught in our schools and the most common second language spoken in our streets and homes.

Fortunately, interest in foreign languages is increasing. Some states have taken serious steps to make sure that all high schools (including small and rural high schools) offer foreign languages. And according to a 1987 survey, one-fifth of elementary schools offer some instruction in foreign languages. New technology (for example, courses delivered over satellite links) is also making instruction in Japanese and Russian more common. Instruction, however, needs to begin in the early grades, and it needs to be *continuously* available through high school.

Schools in the United States have had trouble sustaining foreign language programs. Parents and community members can do a lot to help. They can encourage their own children's interest in foreign languages. They can encourage schools to establish and keep foreign language programs. And finally, they can educate their neighbors about the reasons people need to speak other languages.

For more information, call the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (ERIC/CRESS) toll-free at 1-800/624-9120. We can help direct you to other resources. To find out more about the ERIC system and its varied units and services, call ACCESS ERIC at 1-800/USE-ERIC. Staff of ERIC/CRESS prepared this article, based on information in the ERIC database.

Are the Children Home Alone? (Don't Worry, Be Savvy!)



TODAY, even in two-parent families, both parents often work. As a result, many children routinely spend time at home without adult supervision. Moreover, single parents have long faced the challenge of working *and* caring for young children alone.

Easy answers don't exist. After-school daycare is hard to find. (It's almost *impossible* to find in most rural areas.) When it is available, it is very expensive. This means that most of us really have no alternative but to be away from our children at times when they might need us.

Some reports refer to children's "self-care." This term interprets parents' necessary absence from the home (at work) as a choice. Obviously, it usually isn't a choice, and self-care is sometimes not a good alternative.

On the other hand, many, if not most, children 11 or older can manage after school. If the areas in which they live are not dangerous, and if parents make plans, "self-care" can be a good experience. Children can, if protected by a set of ground rules, learn to be responsible for themselves.

Maybe the real question is "When is being home alone acceptable?" Things to consider include:

- Is your neighborhood safe?
- Will a neighbor help in an emergency?
- Can your children get in touch with you when they need you?
- Do you need the cooperation of your employer? What for?
- What ground rules do your children need to follow when home alone?

Depending on your situation and what your children are like, ground rules will vary. The idea is that parent and child understand what to expect, how to deal with the expected, and what to do when the *unexpected* comes up.

In general, though, consider making rules for:

- visits from friends,
- use of the television,
- completion of homework,
- answering the door or phone,
- going outside,
- using appliances, and
- dealing with squabbles among brothers and sisters.

Rules can't cover every situation, and that's why it's important that children know how to contact you at work.

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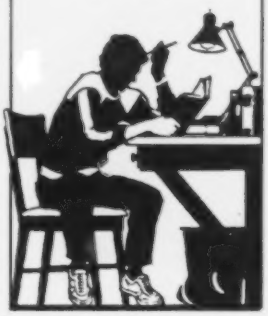
Learning to Read Well: Some Simple Facts



THOSE OF US who can read take our skill for granted. For us, reading is as easy as talking or breathing. Many of us can vaguely remember that learning to read was no easy chore.

But chances are, we've forgotten all the little struggles we had to wage to get where we could actually hear those little printed words in our heads! This forgetfulness makes it difficult for parents to sympathize with young readers, or for adults who can read to sympathize much with those who can't. Luckily, there are people who study reading, so even as adults we can begin to understand the mysterious process of learning to read.

Here are some simple facts about reading. Keep them in mind. They may help you help someone you care about learn to read:

- 5,000 words account for 90 percent of the words we read;
- 94 percent of all words appear less than 10 times per million words;
- people who know sounds and letters tend to do better when they start learning to read;
- but—just teaching the alphabet doesn't give students a noticeable advantage in learning to read;
- many children get over 1,000 hours of contact with reading and writing *before they enter school;* and
- students without such experience do better with their reading if they use "invented" spelling (rather than correct spelling) when they begin to write.

Other facts let us know that a good start in reading is very important. For example, 40 percent of poor readers in the fourth grade would rather clean their rooms than read! These children will overcome their bad start only with the help of someone who cares.

The message is simple: Learning to read takes *a lot of low-pressure experience* with the written word. This includes being read to by someone else and talking about sounds, letters, words, and writing with someone who likes to read. It also includes things like telling stories and having someone else write them down. And, of course, it includes plenty of reading. Naturally, the best reading materials are those that seem to interest the beginning reader.

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Helping Your Children Put Divorce Behind Them

THE SHARP rise in divorce rates alarmed the nation during the 1970s and early 1980s. Some researchers predicted that *half* of all children would spend part of their childhoods in single-parent homes. Others reported that children from single-parent homes had more problems in school. People worried that growing up in a single-parent home was risky business.

New studies, however, show little or no difference in the school achievement of children from similar backgrounds in one-parent and two-parent families. "From similar backgrounds" is the key phrase. The early studies failed to look at single-parent upbringing within a given income bracket.

Recent studies, however, do show divorce to be a traumatic event for children. But they also show that most children adjust well enough, after a time. Communication, warmth, and structure from adults are the things that build a strong family. And that applies to both single-parent and two-parent families.

What can you do about school if your family must deal with divorce? You can help make sure that school is a source of help. During the first weeks, let your children's teachers know about the crisis in your family. Teachers, too, can provide warmth and structure, and some extra words of encouragement. Don't forget, many teachers may have gone through divorce themselves! Schools may also put you in touch with support or counseling groups. Teachers can recommend insightful library books for you and your children.

Expect the adjustment to take up to two years. Stay in touch with teachers and school counselors for that long—until everyone feels resettled and secure in the new family arrangement. Once things settle down, expect your children to do just as well as those from two-parent families. Make sure that school people share your view.

Also, be sure to take part in as many school events as your schedule allows. That will show something to two groups: your children and their teachers. Taking part shows that you consider schooling *so important* that you save time for it in your obviously busy schedule.

Finally, remember this: Your child lives in a family that is a lot like many other families today. There is every reason to be optimistic about the outcome.

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The World According to Science: Think About It

IF YOUR children are like most, they think that "science" is a class in school, and that the most important thing is whether or not the teacher is in a good mood. This is a pretty common reaction. It's understandable. The world of children is small.

Science, however, is a lot more than what happens to a child in science class. It's also more than all the discoveries of science put together. Science is *a way of knowing*. The word itself means "knowing" in Latin. Is this all Greek to you? It shouldn't be. The Greek word for "knowing" is "mathematics." Math and science have a lot in common, and mathematics is sometimes called "the handmaiden of science."

What is this special way of knowing?

First, science takes a particular view of the world. Most of all, the world according to science is *understandable*. Scientists also believe that their ideas can and should change, but that, at the same time, careful study will produce lasting knowledge. The search for lasting knowledge leads science to grow in its understanding of the world.

Second, the methods of science put the belief that the world is understandable into action. Scientists work with evidence, logic, and imagination to *explain and predict* events in the real world. That's where math comes in. Math is both the language of logic and an important tool for collecting and dealing with evidence.

In short, the "scientific method" is not bloodless, mechanical, or boring. It's a complicated business of looking beneath the surface of things. It entails a lot of pain and heartache for scientists, but it is very exciting.

Like our children, we need to understand that science is more than a class in school. It's a special set of beliefs and tools and habits of mind for considering the real world. Science can be useful whenever we need to look beneath the surface of things. Good science teachers understand these points. With a little help from us, our children will begin to understand that what happens in school is only part of the picture. In fact, we understand more about families, businesses, farms, and schools because these parts of life have been studied scientifically.

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I Don't Have Time to Read—Honest!

AN AMAZING thing happens to children: They grow into adulthood. In the time of greatest change, teenagers can look like adults and act like children (and vice versa). The transformation is wonderful and, at times, frightening.

The unpredictable behavior of adolescence can weaken the relationship between parent and child. That's too bad, because the process of leading into adulthood is what the word "education" originally meant (in Latin). If we abandon teenagers to their own devices, we abandon their education.

Take reading. In childhood, the stress is to learn to read. When our children do learn, we are apt to sigh in relief. School success is clearly a lot easier when a child reads well. Later, however, we take less interest in our teenagers' reading habits. Perhaps we think, "Let them relax and watch TV or gab on the phone."

When that happens, we've lost it. Because reading isn't some kind of chore, and teenagers don't need to get the message that it is. Reading with a purpose is part of the adult role. The idea of purpose is a bit complicated, but it means that the adult has some reason—some motive that he or she is aware of—for reading. There are about as many motives as there are adults, so "motivation" is not really a problem.

One thing teachers and parents can do is to help teenagers discover those motives. Obviously, that can happen only when adults who read actively share experiences, views, and information with the teenagers they care about. Teenagers seek role models, and both parents and teachers are near at hand for this purpose—so becoming a role model is not really so difficult.

Some of the motives that have meaning for teenagers include knowledge about personal relationships and getting insights into one's own identity. They include reading that helps a person develop opinions and values or understand current events. More practical motives include investigating career options, expanding knowledge of a hobby or special interest, or becoming a more shrewd shopper.

When people who care about them read and share the importance of reading, then teenagers learn not just *how* to read, but they learn *what reading is for.*

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